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ABSTRACT

The fifth National Education Goal--every adult will be literate and possess the necessary skills for competing in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship--is being implemented in part through workplace literacy programs. To reach the goal of universal literacy in the United States, five objectives were established. The second of these objectives--all workers will have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to adapt to constantly emerging new technologies, new work methods, and new markets through public and private vocational, technical, workplace, or other innovative programs--is the focus of this digest. Such programs focus on raising workers' skill levels to improve their performance in complex work environments. Through increased federal and state attention, workplace literacy programs have proliferated. Examples of successful programs illustrate innovative approaches or solutions to problems other program developers may face. SALSA (Southwest Advanced Learning System for Adults) trained Motorola employees to use home computers for accessing computer-based instruction. A union-sponsored program enabled health care workers to prepare for college and professional advancement by improving their reading, writing, and math skills. In Saskatchewan (Canada), workers trained as course leaders returned to their worksites to implement programs featuring cooperative learning and self-pacing. The Competitive Skills Project equipped chemical industry workers with higher skills needed to participate in total quality management. California migrant workers improved their English proficiency and learned life skills for entering mainstream U.S. society. Sources such as the Adult Learning and Literacy Clearinghouse of the U.S. Department of Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education provide additional information on workplace literacy for program developers. (SK)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

## Workplace Literacy: Lessons from Practice

by Sandra Kerka and Susan Imel

1993

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The fifth national education goal established in September 1990 states that "by the year 2000 every adult American will be literate and will possess the skills necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (National Governors' Association 1990, p. 11). To reach the goal of universal literacy in the United States, five objectives were established. The second of these objectives—all workers will have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to adapt to constantly emerging new technologies, new work methods, and new markets through public and private vocational, technical, workplace, or other innovative programs—is the focus of this *Digest*. Designed to furnish readers with information that can be used in implementing goal five, it provides practice illustrations gleaned from workplace literacy programs. Following a brief overview of the status of workplace literacy, project highlights that are potentially useful to program developers are described. It concludes with resources that can be consulted for additional information.

### The Status of Workplace Literacy

During the 1980s, workplace literacy was catapulted to national prominence by the perception that, as a nation, the United States was losing its competitive edge. Viewed by many as a solution to the nation's economic woes, the area of workplace literacy became a growth industry within the education and training community. Workplace literacy programs were developed with the goal of raising workers' basic skills so that they could perform more effectively in increasingly complex work environments. Many diverse strategies and programs have been implemented to address the need for a better educated work force (Imel 1992). Because of the nature of workplace literacy programs, there are no accurate estimates of numbers of programs and participants. Since 1988, however, more than 200 programs have been funded under the U.S. Department of Education's National Workplace Literacy Program, including several that are statewide initiatives.

Due to increased federal and state support for workplace literacy efforts, more project descriptions are available. Although workplace literacy programs must be customized to a particular work environment and workplace culture, the program descriptions provided here have special features that illustrate innovative approaches to basic skills development and/or they encountered particular problems that provide useful information to program developers about what works and doesn't work (Imel and Kerka 1992).

### Program Descriptions

**SALSA (Southwest Advanced Learning System for Adults)** (1991). Project SALSA capitalized on several trends in its unique approach to workplace literacy: home computer use, family literacy, and productivity improvement through human resource development. Building on the known link between computer-assisted instruction and literacy enhancement, Macintosh microcomputers were placed in the homes of Motorola production line employees in Arizona. Following 14 hours of training, employees used home computers to access structured lessons in reading, language, math, spelling, and critical thinking available through NovaNet, a software library at the University of Illinois. Recommendations include the following: expert trainers to provide system training at a pace that ensures understanding; troubleshooters/technical support staff who are local and accessible; a shared-cost purchase program to enable employees to buy the microcomputers in their homes; and a software library to ensure that computer use and learning continue after the project ends.

**Workplace Literacy Instruction for College Preparation of Health Care Workers** (Perin 1992). The shortage of health care workers for technical positions prompted this program designed to prepare health care paraprofessionals for college programs and advancement to these positions. Although the paraprofessionals had high school diplomas or equivalencies, their low literacy skills prevented them from entering college programs. The 153 participants were taught in union facilities 6 hours per week for 8 months, on their own time. The curriculum, based on literacy task analysis of college health occupations programs and textbooks, included reading, writing, and math directly related to health care job practices. Collaborative learning, videotaped biology and chemistry lectures for independent study, and college preparatory educational counseling were also featured. A committee of student representatives provided ongoing feedback about participant concerns and reactions. Recommendations were as follows: initial screening for reading and math as well as writing, then individualized instruction to focus on an individual's weaker areas; pre- and postprogram assessment of career-related motivation and career knowledge; a "tryout" orientation to college preparation to help people determine their motivation for a long-term program; accommodation for those who find instruction too fast paced (for example, peer tutoring); college placement tests taken immediately after program completion to maximize the effects of the program; and ongoing support (such as tutoring and counseling) provided throughout college.

**Workers' Education for Skills Training** (O'Gorman 1991). The Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) adapted Ontario Federation of Labour's BEST program to meet the special needs of low-literate workers in the province. W.E.S.T. (Workers' Education for Skills Training) was designed to address the following needs: more SFL members in the service sector than in manufacturing, the geographic isolation of sites, and the English as a second language (ESL) needs of Canada Natives. Based on the premise of literacy for empowerment, W.E.S.T. focused on participatory learning. Thirteen workers, from six companies whose workers were SFL members, attended a 2-week residential training program for course leaders. They returned to their worksites certified to implement programs, which featured cooperative learning, self-pacing, confidentiality in regard to individuals' skill levels, and curriculum materials created and developed by participants. Recommendations include the following: programs should begin with the premise that low-literate persons already know how to learn for they have used coping skills for years; training manuals should include more cross-cultural materials; course leaders should have English communication skills and perhaps should know other languages in programs featuring ESL, and they should respect other cultures and have a collective

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leadership style; and rigorous, documented evaluation of a program's effects on skill levels is needed to demonstrate its worth to employers.

**Competitive Skills Project** (1992). Workers with limited written and verbal skills cannot participate fully in total quality management (TQM), a concept being used in business and industry to ensure continuous attention to the quality of products and services by all members of an organization. Thus, the goal of the Competitive Skills Project (CSP) was to improve chemical industry workers' skills for implementing quality principles and technological innovation. Needs assessments, literacy audits, and task analyses were used to develop context-based customized curricula in three areas: language-based literacy (e.g., understanding instructions, following directions), numerical literacy (e.g., understanding specifications, implementing statistical techniques), and basic computer literacy. The following recommendations were made: consistency of project staff and business partners is critical to effectiveness; cooperation of line supervisors should be ensured in such areas as release time for class attendance and acceptance of TQM input from newly trained employees; and formulation of customized curricula is an ongoing process requiring continual modification.

**Rural Workplace Literacy Project** (1991). California agribusinesses deal with increasingly complex agricultural technology and an emphasis on quality control in production, but many of their workers are temporary, nonnative English speakers. The Rural Workplace Literacy Project provided literacy classes at 15 worksites to 264 migrant and seasonal farmworkers, the majority with limited English proficiency and less than a sixth-grade education. A core curriculum for agriculture was tailored to each site and included whole language, cooperative learning, and problem-posing approaches. The curriculum emphasized communications in the workplace and life skills for entering mainstream U.S. society. Recommendations were as follows: a core curriculum should emphasize math and a broad matrix of communication skills; employers need to be informed about the benefits and implications of workplace literacy, particularly the connection to productivity; the diversity of levels and objectives among students could be addressed with a variety of peer support techniques (tutoring, small practice groups, discussion circles, homework groups), giving workers an opportunity to practice teamwork skills; and individualized educational plans should be practical instruments expressing reasonable learning expectations.

### Resources for Further Information

A number of groups and organizations provide information on workplace literacy. Two that are national in scope are described here.

Adult Learning and Literacy Clearinghouse, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue, S. W., Mary E. Switzer Building, Room 4428, Washington, DC 20202-7240; (202) 732-2396. Provides a variety of information on workplace literacy including two publications featuring the National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP): ***Workplace Education: Voices from the Field*** (1992) and ***Workplace Literacy: Reshaping the American Workforce*** (1992). The latter is a source of information on exemplary projects funded by the NWLP.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment (CETE), 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090; (614) 292-4353; (800) 848-4815. Free publications on the topic of workplace literacy include ***Digests*** and ***Trends and Issues Alerts***. Also developed ***Workplace Literacy: A Guide to the Literature and Resources***, which includes an extensive annotated bibliography of workplace literacy resources and program descriptions. (Available as IN 352 from CETE's Publication Office for $7.00 plus $3.50 shipping and handling.) Provides information services including searches of the ERIC database, which contains many project and program descriptions.

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